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ABSTRACT

Some of the most prominent aspects of an ethnographic study of six black undergraduate women at the University of Pittsburgh have been the questions of authenticity and visibility that have emerged while the ethnographer watched the ways students' voices challenged their various composition and writing intensive course instructors' expectations. As she observed the students' written negotiations with their predominantly white audiences, and particularly with their white instructors, the ethnographer noticed that one of the white instructors did not seem to consider her black students' voices "authentic" unless they were articulating black racial issues. At this juncture of the research, the ethnographer would generally argue that, based on observed specifics, when instructors bring their conjectures about the features of a racially "authentic" voice to their readings of minority student writing, it can obstruct their view of the student as a whole student writer. When they ignore race, however, it can render them unable to see the difference that the students' race can make to their writing. Examples of the first pedagogic approach and of the second pedagogic approach help illustrate the issue. The upside of the two examples is that each of the two students' voices emerged in response to each of their instructors' pedagogical approaches in ways that turned their instructors' ideas about authenticity (the first case) and visibility (the second case) upside down. But perhaps a less obstructive middle ground exists. (NKA)

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"The Double-Bind of 'Voice':
Complicating the Reading of Minority Student Writing"

1

Last year, I conducted an ethnographic study with six black undergraduate women at the University of Pittsburgh. I was collecting contextual data for a rhetorical interpretation of their written academic voices that I am now using in my dissertation about these students' developing public intellectual voices. In the fall, I started working with the women in their freshman composition, or "General Writing," classes—interviewing each woman twice, observing each of their classrooms, collecting their writings for the course, and interviewing each of their General Writing instructors once. In the spring, I followed the women to more advanced writing intensive courses, where my student and instructor interviews, classroom observations, and collection of writings continued.

Some of the most prominent aspects of my study have been the questions of authenticity and visibility that have emerged while I have been watching the ways in which the students' voices challenge their various composition and writing intensive course instructors' expectations. In more than one case, those expectations primarily seemed to be based on the students' race, which was very visible because these black women were writing their way into the discourse communities of a predominately white university. They had to negotiate the expectations of a predominately white audience,

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because they were usually one of only a few black students in their writing courses, and in a couple of cases the only one. More importantly, however, while one of the six instructors who participated in my study was African American, and another was a black South African, the other four were white. As I observed these students' written negotiations with their predominately white audiences, and particularly with their white instructors, I noticed that one of the white instructors did not seem to consider her black students' voices "authentic" unless they were articulating black racial issues. This was troubling to me, given the fact that their voices were just as strong and distinctive when they were writing about racial issues as when they weren't writing about them—which was most of the time. Equally troubling, on the other hand, was the well-meaning move another white instructor made to erase black racial issues from his syllabus and class discussions, in an attempt to prevent his black students from feeling singled out by their difference—or from feeling *too* visible. This move was equally troubling to me because it could easily be read by his black students as a message that black issues are not worth discussing or writing about—thus discouraging their potential *choice* to write papers that were about those issues and perhaps *intentionally* different from their classmates'.

At this juncture of my research, then, I would generally argue, based on the specifics I observed, that when instructors bring their conjectures about the features of a racially "authentic" voice to their readings of minority student writing, it can obstruct their view of the student as a whole student writer. On the other hand, when they ignore race, it can render them unable to see the difference that the students' race *can* make to their writing. Thus, in their efforts to understand the voices of minority student writers, white composition instructors often find themselves caught up in the pedagogic double

bind of either making their students' races visible, or rendering them invisible, and not reaching a real understanding either way. I am going to spend the rest of my presentation offering an example, from my research, of the first pedagogic approach, and then an example of the second, in order to open up a discussion about how we, as composition instructors, might move beyond both approaches and the "either/or" they impose.

The first pedagogic approach emerged during my interview with Ms. Leonard, the white female instructor of the General Writing course taken by Adele--one of the students in my study. During that interview, Ms. Leonard insisted that the only time she had "heard" Adele's "true" voice in her writing up to that time was "when Adele read a poem about racism" in her journal. The poem was Countee Cullen's "Incident," which is about a racist incident, and Adele responded to it with a remembrance of a first grade classmate's reference to her as "Nigger." It was a promising moment in the interview when Ms. Leonard said she was afraid Adele would think she thought the journal entry was good only because it was about race. However, she immediately followed up with the hazy explanation that she thought it was good because Adele had "found her voice," and it was a "heartfelt, sincere and honest response."

From what I knew then and know now about Adele's writing, I agree that her voice emerged in that journal entry, but not for the reasons Ms. Leonard named. Given most students' ongoing quests to please their teachers to earn good grades, it is very difficult, if not nearly impossible, to tell when their written voices are heartfelt, sincere, and honest. Therefore, in search of something more concrete, I subsequently asked Ms. Leonard: "What do you imagine her voice would look like, if you got to see more of it?" The answer she gave me then was not influenced by Adele's race, and sounded much

more plausible. She said she believed Adele would be an "essayist," and that "she has great empathy [with] the things that she's read." "So, because of that," she continued, "I see her as being sort of a social writer… sort of somebody who would like to write social injustice, or something…. And maybe in some kind of psychological field."[1]

Given that *I* frequently found "empathy," a flair for "social writing," and attempts at "psychology" in her writing, I believe that Ms Leonard's guesses were accurate. The irony here is that, in what she initially said about Adele's journal entry, she seemed to have missed the fact that Adele found a way to use all three of those elements in the midst of her description of a painful personal experience with racism. Adele was an empathetic writer of social injustice and a psychologist when she wrote:

> We were only six years old, where could he have heard this kind of language. My guess would be the home.
>
> My classmate was an innocent boy, just like the one in the poem. He was an example of innocence being corrupted by society. They did not know what they were saying or probably even what it meant.

Adele's use of the phrase "in the home" in her explanation of the six-year old white boy's behavior sounds like the phrasing of a psychologist who has traced a patient's behavior to his domestic situation. Also, it takes a great amount of empathy for a black person to say about the social injustice of being called a "Nigger" that the speaker "did not know what they were saying or what it meant." I saw these elements over and over again in Adele's writing, whether she was writing about race or not (and most of the time she *wasn't* writing about race), and I find it intriguing that, after she put her race hyper-consciousness aside, Ms. Leonard was able to see them, too.

The second pedagogical approach also turned up in the fall, during my interview

with Professor Lash, the white male instructor of the General Writing class taken by Tyra, another student in my study. The theme of Professor Lash's section of the course was to encourage his students to "re-think" what he called in his course description the "'lore' of English and its usages." In our interview, he said he was reluctant to talk about "Black American English" in his course, because "It's so charged," and he didn't want his two black students to "feel like they needed *either* to defend or attack it."[2] I understood his caution, given what he identified as the "disquiet around issues of race," as well as the likelihood that, if those issues had been brought up in class, Tyra and/or the other black student just might have felt impelled to speak for their race. Nonetheless, his caution meant that those issues were left out of his and his students' discourse. Thus, it is difficult for me not to interpret Tyra's local inclusion of a black American English issue in her essay response to one particular assignment as either a conscious or unconscious argument for the global inclusion of those kinds of issues in the discourse of the class.

The assignment asked students to "articulate" a "relevant issue" or "ongoing debate" "about English and its usage today." In response, Tyra grappled with the debate over whether English should "become the international language." In the physical middle of that essay, in which she speaks generally about the issue, she spends a paragraph zeroing in on the Dictionary of Afro-American Slang and Black Jargon in White America--two books about Black English Vernacular that she calls "direct forms of racism and segregation." "These books," she says, "are meant to teach you how to talk like the black man, but all they really do is serve up some prime examples of ethnic stereotypes.... These books incorrectly separate black speech patterns from other English speech patterns and makes a mockery of them." She uses this argument to support her

larger argument that English will never become the international language as long as certain dialects of English are ridiculed and used to "hold up disunity, cultural intolerance, and ethnic stereotypes." Tyra's argument is significant, because it is an argument *against* the segregation of Black American English that talks back to her white instructor's decision to leave it out of his course about English language issues. As if in direct response to his caution, she boldly placed her black racial argument right in the middle of her essay about a more general English language issue. Thus, as she wrote her way into the discourse of her composition class, she was also making her race visible in that discourse.

The upside of these two examples is that each of the two students' voices emerged in response to each of their instructors' pedagogical approaches in ways that turned their instructors' ideas about authenticity (in the first case) and visibility (in the second case) upside down. The downside is that while I—a black ethnographer—could see these black students as whole student writers, their white instructors could not, because their race-inflected pedagogies got in the way. Each instructor made a choice, and each choice brought on a partial blindness toward their students' potentials as writers. Is there a less obstructive middle ground? Or a third, or even fourth, approach that would transcend the double-bind? What can we do to insure that we see our minority students as whole student writers who sometimes want to make their differences visible in their writing, *and* whose voices can be equally "authentic" when they don't make their differences visible?

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[1] "Ms. Leonard," personal interview, 19 November 1997, p. 12.
[2] "Professor Lash," personal interview, 18 November 1997, p. 9.